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## Meaning, Meanings, and Epistemology in C.S. Lewis

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### Abstract

Examines some challenging philosophical concepts under Lewis's guidance, and through its discussion of myth, allegory, and truth, brings us back to the influence of medieval thought on Lewis's fiction.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Epistemology; Lewis, C.S.—Philosophy

## MEANING, MEANINGS, AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN C. S. LEWIS

CHARLIE W. STARR

AN obscure film (perhaps a Fellini or a David Lynch), a bizarre piece of modern art, or a complex poem frequently evoke from my students the question, "What does it mean?"—and they take for granted that they know exactly what they are asking. That they should not be so certain of the question would become apparent after a moment of reflection if they would step one question back and ask, "What does *meaning* mean?" Asking the meaning of *meaning* is a quandary because the very question presupposes a knowledge of the answer. Webster's Dictionary suggests three common uses of the term: "intention" (as when we ask what a person meant by a certain remark), "signification" (as when we ask the meaning of a word or a poem), and "importance" (as when we say that a momentous life event was a "meaningful" one). When C.S. Lewis wrote about meaning, it was usually in reference to *signification*, and in one of two ways. The theme that dominates Lewis's writing about *meaning* is an epistemological one: Lewis believed that the relationship between sign and signified was much broader than the cognitive act of assigning abstract symbols to ideas and experiences. Whenever we ask what something means, we are almost always looking for a response in words; that is, we have come to believe (or at least practice) the concept that meaning consists of ideas that can be expressed in propositional language statements. Lewis understood that the meaning of *meaning* is much larger, preceding abstraction, reason, and even language, and his understanding has implications, not only to a proper understanding of the nature of meaning, but also to our understanding of myth, truth, allegory, metaphor, epistemology, and even the nature of heaven. The minor theme in Lewis's writing on *meaning* involves his interest in the critical question of the correct interpretation of literary texts (in this theme, Lewis is concerned with both "signification" and "intention"). Where in his major theme Lewis is concerned with the epistemology of *meaning*, in his minor theme he is concerned with *meanings* in texts.

### **The Major Theme: *Meaning and Knowing***

To understand Lewis's view of meaning as a concept, we begin with three enigmatic but foundational passages. In the first passage, from *The Last*

*Battle*, Lewis is describing the new Narnia, the heavenly Narnia which turns out to be “[m]ore like the real thing” (210). We learn that the old Narnia, the only one ever known in the books, “was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia, which has always been here and always will be here” (211-12). Lewis continues:

It is as hard to explain how this sunlit land was different from the old Narnia, as it would be to tell you how the fruits of that country taste. Perhaps you will get some idea of it, if you think like this. You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different—deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can’t describe it any better than that: if you ever get there you will know what I mean. (212-13)

The most significant part of the passage above is the line, “as if it meant more.” A quality of the new Narnia which contrasts it with the old is its apparent increase in size (210), but this turns out not to be so much an increase in physical size as in the largeness of its being (the new Narnia looks more “like the real thing” [210]). And as being increases, so does meaning. Read in isolation, the passage could suggest Webster’s third definition, “importance.” A reading of other passages in which meaning is associated with heavenly realms or creatures, however, will suggest that “signification” is the definition of meaning Lewis is concerned with in *The Last Battle*.

The second enigmatic passage occurs in *That Hideous Strength*. The divine plan for the destruction of the N.I.C.E., the government-backed institution through which demonic forces are gaining control of England, calls for the descent of angels. The great eldila—the ruling intelligences of the planets—will descend to Earth and pour their powers into a reawakened Merlin. He will be their instrument of victory. The first to descend is the angel of language, Mercury. To this descent Ransom, the protagonist of Lewis’s space trilogy and the leader of the forces for good in this novel, is a witness:

Ransom gripped the side of his sofa; Merlin grasped his own knees and set his teeth. [...] Quick agitation seized them: a kind of boiling and bubbling in mind and heart which shook their bodies also. [...] It was well that both men had some knowledge of poetry. The doubling, splitting, and recombining of thoughts which now went on in them would have been unendurable for one whom that art had not already instructed in the counterpoint of the mind, the mastery of doubled and trebled vision. For Ransom, whose study had been for many years in the realm of words, it was heavenly pleasure. He found himself sitting within the very heart of language, in the white-hot furnace of essential speech. All fact was broken, splashed into cataracts, caught, turned inside out, kneaded, slain, and reborn as meaning. (321-22)

As with the Narnia passage, meaning is a key element in the experience of divine presence. But how heaven can “mean” more or have greater signification in it than earth, or how fact can be converted into pure “meaning” is not explained.

Lewis is no more clear about his concept of meaning in “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” a work of literary critical theory, than he is in the fiction works above. “Bluspels” is a study in literal versus figurative or metaphorical language near the end of which Lewis concludes that, in the history of writing, those who think themselves the most literal and precise have the least to say, and that “great creators of metaphor” are the “masters of meaning” (156-57). In this context Lewis proceeds with the essay’s final paragraph:

It will have escaped no one that in such a scale of writers the poets will take the highest place; and among the poets those who have at once the tenderest care for old words and the surest instinct for the creation of new metaphors. But it must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning; meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself. I said at the outset that the truth we won by metaphor could not be greater than the truth of the metaphor itself; and we have seen since that all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor. And thence, I confess, it does follow that if our thinking is ever true, then the metaphors by which we think must have been good metaphors. (157-58)

What frustrates our understanding here is that key statements Lewis makes about reason, imagination, truth and meaning in this passage appear as an afterthought, an addendum of clarification, to the rest of the “Bluspels” essay with little clear connection to it. Thus, Lewis’s frequently quoted definitions of imagination as the “organ of meaning” and meaning as the “antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood” have little context in which to be explained. The “Bluspels” essay alone will not explain what Lewis is saying about the meaning of *meaning*.

What is needed, then, is to draw from a variety of sources in the Lewis corpus to understand his epistemology of meaning and therefore better our own. At the heart of Lewis’s concept of meaning is an epistemological dilemma which he discusses in his essay “Myth Became Fact”:

Human intellect is incurably abstract. Pure mathematics is the type of successful thought. Yet the only realities we experience are concrete—this pain, this pleasure, this dog, this man. While we are loving the man, bearing the pain, enjoying the pleasure, we are not intellectually apprehending Pleasure, Pain, or Personality. When we begin to do so, on the other hand, the concrete realities sink to the level of mere instances or examples: we are no longer dealing with them, but with that which they exemplify. This is our dilemma—either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste—or, more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it. [...]

Of this tragic dilemma myth is the partial solution. In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. (“Myth Became Fact” 65-66)

It is in this epistemological context that Lewis goes on to the definitions frequently referenced in studies on his view of myth; however, immediately important is our understanding of the epistemological dilemma of thinking (which is abstract) and experiencing (which is concrete). The concrete/abstract dilemma keeps us from ever knowing a thing completely. We can think about it; we can experience it. We cannot do both simultaneously, and each has its limits when isolated. This epistemological problem is the result of a more basic one, the separation of subject from object.

Because we (the thinking subject) are constantly separated from the objects of life about which we want to know, we are never able simultaneously to both experience them and think about them. But in what way are we separated from the objects we want to know? Answering this question requires the recognition of yet another separation, that between matter and spirit, which

Leanne Payne notes is not so much in reality as in our perceptions of it: “for Lewis the sharp division of nature from super-nature, of matter from created spirit, may be an accident of our limited point of view” (46). Mineko Honda connects the subject/object split with the matter/spirit split in Lewis’s thinking: “Lewis believes in heaven as the world of objective Reality to which our present world is, as it were, only a world of subjectivity” (101). Honda directs us to a description of heaven in *Letters to Malcolm*:

It is like seeing nature itself rising from its grave. What was sown in momentariness is raised in still permanence. What was sown as a becoming, rises as being. Sown in subjectivity, it rises in objectivity. The transitory secret of two is now a chord in the ultimate music. [...] [T]he hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute is to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal. (*Malcolm* 123)

If, in our current world, we live in a state where we, as subjects, are constantly separated from the objects we would know, and if this is indeed because we face a disconnection among matter, mind, and spirit, then the problem of thinking and experiencing, of abstract analysis and concrete awareness is clarified. We are unable to both experience and think about anything (and therefore completely know it) because we are only able to connect to it as matter. Spirit, in this model of knowing, becomes the conduit (in this case the missing conduit) between subjective mind and external object.

If humanity lived in a world like the heaven Lewis describes in the passage from *Letters to Malcolm* above, spirit would be more fully connecting all subjects to all objects so that to experience a thing in the body and to think about its significance would be a single, simultaneous activity. As in Lewis’s new Narnia, everything would *mean* more. In heaven, spirit connects the subjective to the objective, the mind to the experience and even the thing being experienced, so that to experience is to know—to taste and see—the meaning in an instant. This is what Lewis means in *That Hideous Strength* when he says that fact is broken down and converted into meaning in the presence of the ‘angel of language,’ the mediating spirit between subject and object.

To the dichotomies above we might add that spirit connects the abstract to the concrete, but “Myth Became Fact” suggests a more complex activity. First Lewis makes a connection between “myth” and “reality” and a separation of “reality” from “truth”: “What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is)”

(66). Reality (or fact<sup>1</sup>) is what is; truth is a proposition *about* fact. A little later in the paragraph Lewis notes that myth is not “like direct experience,” and in the following paragraph he asserts that myth “comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history” (66). Though Lewis is using the terms “heaven” and “earth” metaphorically in this line, that he attributes the epistemological dilemma to our current earthly state and its solution to heaven, or the marriage of heaven and earth (or even, as will be shown later, to an unfallen earthly paradise) is suggested in *The Last Battle* passage above, apparent in the passage quoted from *Letters to Malcolm*, and will be further supported hereafter.

Next, Lewis describes our earthly existence as a “valley of separation” (66*n*). He suggests, “Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; *in hac valle abstractionis*” (66). What is Lewis saying about reality in this metaphor? “Myth Became Fact” is here revealing interconnected realities: the reality we experience on earth, the cognitive experience of making abstract statements of truth about that reality, and the experience of a transcendent something (a higher reality, a myth-like heavenly realm) in mythic stories.

Here a note on Lewis’s Platonism adds clarity. In *The Last Battle*, Digory, looking about at the new Narnia, seeing that it is a fuller, more real version of the old Narnia, comments that “It’s all in Plato, all in Plato” (212). Plato believed in a

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<sup>1</sup> A thorough reading of Lewis shows that he uses the terms “fact” and “reality” synonymously. In “Myth Became Fact,” Lewis distinguishes between “truth” and “reality”: “truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is” (66). Consider a similar passage from *Miracles*: “Events in general are not ‘about’ anything and cannot be true or false. (To say ‘these events, or facts are false’ means of course that someone’s account of them is false.)” (27). Lewis equates “events” with “facts” and says of the relationship between “events” and “truth” the same thing he says of “reality” and “truth.” In the paragraph that follows the one quoted above from “Myth Became Fact,” Lewis argues that “the heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. [...] It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences” (66). This line makes synonymous connections between “fact” and “history,” and “fact” and “events” (the reference, “It happens”). Several passages in *Miracles* indicate these and other synonymous connections. In noting that “concrete, individual, determinate things do now exist,” Lewis demands that these “are not mere principles or generalities or theorems, but things—facts—real, resistant existences” (115). He shortly thereafter refers to the “brute fact of existence, the fact that it is actually there and is itself.” Lewis says “a complete philosophy must get in *all* the facts” (58) and then later refers to the “rightful demand that all reality should be consistent and systematic” (83). Even stronger are the references to God as “the basic, original, self-existent Fact” (43), and as “an uncreated and unconditioned reality” (105). The connection between “fact” and “reality” is clear.



higher world of ideal forms where, for example, the concept of a chair on earth was an abstraction of the concrete universal form of a chair in Plato's higher world. Lewis's Platonic thinking in "Myth Became Fact" is one in which idea and form, separated here in the valley below, come together on the mountain above where abstract ideas *become* concrete forms. Lewis was here heavily influenced by Abbott's *Flatland* (a book to which Lewis refers, or from which he borrows, in several texts, most directly in "Bluspels and Flalansferes"). In the book, the higher dimensions of existence have higher dimensions of space. Beyond Lineland is Flatland, above which is Spaceland, above which, it is hypothesized, there is a four dimensional space where objects have more sides and lines than any below. This hypothesized world of four spatial dimensions is called "Thoughtland" (Abbott 73). In that place must dwell "Extra-Solids" and perhaps "Double Extra-Solids" (77). But it is a world of thought. Perhaps this is Lewis's vision (in *Letters to Malcolm*) when he says heaven is a place where subject and object come together: thought and form become one when subject experiences object.<sup>2</sup> But a clear indication of Lewis's thinking can be found in *The Great Divorce*. A ghostly man who has a passion for inquiry (though not for actually finding any truth) is visiting the outskirts of heaven. There he meets an old friend who has moved beyond the ghostly stage to full presence, full being in heaven. The glorified man is there to invite the ghost to go further in. But the ghost refuses unless certain guarantees are met, especially "an atmosphere of free inquiry" (43). The glorified man tells his friend he will find no such thing; he will find final answers. The ghost responds that there is "something stifling about the idea of finality" to which the other replies, "You think that, because hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom" (43). Thus, in Lewis's Platonic vision, what can only be an abstract idea on earth is concrete reality in heaven.

Rather than saying, then, that abstract is connected to concrete in heavenly realms in Lewis's epistemology, it is better to say that, when one leaves the valley of abstraction (the earth of our current epistemological experience) for the mountain of myth (the heaven Lewis describes in *Letters to Malcolm* and *The Great Divorce*), abstraction and separation disappear as what become abstract truths here in the valley are followed to their concrete mythic sources on the mountaintop. There is, therefore, no place along the stream pouring from the

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis would not say that subject and object fuse so completely in heaven as to become indistinguishable. His concept of Trinity is the mirror of his concept of humanity in heaven—they are one and many (*The Problem of Pain* 150). Instead, subject and object draw near, commingling but not consuming, so that the experiencing of the object is instantaneously correspondent with a knowledge of its meaning. The form is the idea; all ideas become objects capable of being experienced. Fact is transformed into meaning.

mountain down into the valley ("Myth Became Fact" 66) where one may stop and say, "here is truth but there is myth." The separation no longer exists. Experiencing and thinking simply become knowing.

How, then, do Lewis's ideas about abstract and concrete knowing relate to his concept of meaning? In "Myth Became Fact," Lewis refers to the "abstract meaning" of a story (66). This line appears to equate meaning with truth (since truth is defined as abstractions that come down to the valley from the concrete mountain of myth). However, as we saw in "Bluspels," Lewis clearly states that truth (associated with reason) and meaning (associated with imagination) are not the same thing (157). So we must return to "Myth Became Fact" to look at Lewis's use of the term "meaning":

I am trying to understand something very abstract indeed—the fading, vanishing of tasted reality as we try to grasp it with the discursive reason. Probably I have made heavy weather of it. But if I remind you, instead, of Orpheus and Eurydice, how he was suffered to lead her by the hand but, when he turned round to look at her, she disappeared, what was merely a principle becomes imaginable. You may reply that you never till this moment attached that 'meaning' to that myth. Of course not. You are not looking for an abstract 'meaning' at all. If that was what you were doing the myth would be for you no true myth but a mere allegory. You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we *state* this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely. (66)

Sense can be made of the term *meaning* here by beginning with the last sentence. When we receive myth as story, we are experiencing a principle concretely. Only when we put the experience into words does the principle become abstract. But if we can know a principle either concretely or by abstraction, then meaning can be either concrete or abstract. This agrees with the statement in "Bluspels" that meaning is the necessary antecedent condition to truth (157). Some meanings are abstract statements. Some abstract statements, like, "The Cobra's bite is lethal," correspond to reality and are therefore true. Lewis defined truth as "an external correspondence of statement and reality" (from the minutes of the Oxford Socratic Club, qtd. in Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter" 153). But statements require the use of words and words must have meanings—they must signify something (or else they are nonsense words, and Lewis says in "Bluspels" [157] that nonsense is the opposite of meaning). Meaning is the antecedent condition of truth because truth is a statement corresponding to reality and such statements have meaning. In addition, however, there are other kinds of meanings, kinds that can only be apprehended in the imagination.

In Lewis's thinking, truth statements are meanings about reality that have been abstracted out of reality, but there are other kinds of meanings, mythic ones, that come prior to abstraction and apart from language. Here we turn to Lewis's Introduction to his *George MacDonald: An Anthology*:

We all agree that the story of Balder is a great myth, a thing of inexhaustible value. But of whose version—whose *words*—are we thinking when we say this?

For my own part, the answer is that I am not thinking of anyone's words. No poet, as far as I know or can remember, has told this story supremely well. I am not thinking of any particular version of it. If the story is anywhere embodied in words, that is almost an accident. What really delights and nourishes me is a particular pattern of events, which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached me by some medium which involved no words at all—say by a mime, or a film. [...] In this respect stories of the mythical type are at the opposite pole from lyrical poetry. If you try to take the "theme" of Keats's *Nightingale* apart from the very words in which he has embodied it, you find that you are talking about almost nothing. Form and content can there be separated only by a false abstraction. But in a myth—in a story where the mere pattern of events is all that matters—this is not so. Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging those events in our imagination has, as we say, "done the trick". After that you can throw the means of communication away. [...] In poetry the words are the body and the "theme" or "content" is the soul. But in myth the imagined events are the body and something inexpressible is the soul: the words, or mime, or film, or pictorial series are not even clothes—they are not much more than a telephone. (26-28)

Lewis suggests that *any* form of communication, even mime or film, might deliver the mythic story. Even in a myth that is received through language, the specific language will likely disappear from memory; what will remain are the images and events of the story. In this text Lewis calls myth a "particular pattern of events" (27). Perhaps as a pattern, though, myth is a kind or mode of *linguaging* (my term) itself, a language not of words but of images. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis says as much: "giants, dragons, paradises, gods, and the like are themselves the expression of certain basic elements in man's spiritual experience. In that sense they are more like words—the words of a language which speaks the else unspeakable" (57). I have suggested the term "linguaging" here to first indicate that, like language, myth communicates something, second that the content of myth is, nevertheless, not dependent on language, and third that myth is capable of a richer kind of signification than is language (with one

near exception—see Barfield on metaphor below). Lewis’s contrasting of myth and allegory offers insight into this possibility.

In the sixth descriptor in Lewis’s list of myth’s qualities from *An Experiment in Criticism*, he says myth communicates the numinous, a sense of something great which the mind struggles to grasp conceptually (44). This conceptual struggle results in the “persistent tendency of humanity to provide myths with allegorical explanations” (44); however, the myth will continue to mean more. Lewis understood a difference between myth and allegory very early in his thinking. A discussion on the composition of *Dymer*, one of Lewis’s earliest poems, yields a determination by the young poet “to keep the MYTH true and intrude as little invention of conscious allegory as might be” (*All My Road* 16 May 1922, 35). The word “conscious” here is key. Lewis describes the major difference between myth and allegory as having to do with conscious intention and multiplicity of meanings. Later in life he says,

*My* view wd be that a good myth (i.e. a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which *one* meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows; in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and cd not come to know in any other way. (*Letters* 22 September 1956, 458)

Allegory is conscious and its meanings are specific. In allegory correlation between sign and signified is consciously, deliberately applied; the sign has only such meaning as is predetermined by the author.<sup>3</sup> In myth, on the other hand, meanings are multiple, fluid, and greater than the author’s conscious intent. The difference between allegory and myth can be formulated as follows: whereas allegory *contains* meaning, myth simply *means*.

Myth is superior to language (and allegory) because it speaks without abstracting. Furthermore, Lewis believes that “what is expressed in myth is divine metaphysical Reality” (Honda 36). Now the conception of truth we have learned from Lewis (in “Myth Became Fact”) is that, on earth, truth is abstract statements that correspond with reality; however, in the divine realm, such

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars have noted that Lewis’s thoughts on the nature of allegory are inconsistent. His distinction of allegory from myth, however, is not, and whenever he discusses allegory in relation to myth his thinking remains consistent with the ideas represented in the letter of 22 September 1956. Readers interested in an analysis of Lewis’s theory of allegory should read the paper by Myers and the two papers by Piehler listed in the bibliography.

abstractions as truth are concrete, even a Person (*Divorce* 43).<sup>4</sup> This is the only way to explain how Lewis can say myth carries no specific truth statements (abstractions are couched in allegory instead), but still shows us something of reality: higher reality. Like that higher reality, the meanings in myth are multiple and deeper, and like that higher reality, abstraction gives way to the concrete in myth so that truth is no longer statement but reality itself, known not through abstract language which *conveys* meaning but through the mythic mode of *linguaging*: an experience which simply *means*.

In "Is Theology Poetry?" Lewis says myth can carry truth (82). How does this fit in with what we have learned so far? Myth can bear abstract truths, but not in the one-for-one sense that allegory does. Myth contains a plurality of meanings. A few of those meanings are also truths/correspondences with reality (Lewis's idea in "Bluspels and Flalansferes" that meaning is an antecedent to truth [157]), but more meaning exists in the myth than just those truth correspondences. This is one distinction between myth and allegory. But there is another. The activity of abstracting truths from allegory is more conscious and analytical. Receiving meaning from myth, though, is imaginative, intuitive. Therefore, when we find truth in myth, we are not reading it as myth but are allegorizing the myth. Lewis says this is the very thing people constantly do with myth (*Experiment* 44). Though it is not the *best* way to read myth, that Lewis believes myth contains truth shows that it is a *valid* way to read myth. This is true especially when the myth is God's myth, given in the person of Christ ("Myth Became Fact" 66-67) or in God's mythology to the Hebrews (*Miracles* 176n.).

The question that remains is how does myth communicate meaning without using language? I have suggested the idea of *linguaging* (communication in imaginative form apart from language) as an answer. For guidance on this question we turn to the writing of Lewis's friend Owen Barfield. His work *Poetic Diction* influenced much of Lewis's theories on myth, as Lewis notes in *Surprised by Joy*: "Much of the thought which [Barfield] afterward put into *Poetic Diction* had already become mine before that important little book appeared" (200).

Barfield's contention is that linguistic history shows that words in the past did not begin as literal terms which later took on metaphorical meaning. On the contrary, many words taken as literal today are in fact dead metaphors. Lewis says as much in "Bluspels and Flalansferes." But far in the past, as the record of words shows, the distinction between literal and figurative simply did not exist in language, and if not in language then not in human thinking. There was no

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<sup>4</sup> The reader may be interested in Charles A. Huttar's discussion of Lewis's theory of language as revealed in his poetry. Huttar focuses on the limitations of language and its connections to higher reality; see especially pages 103-07.

concrete/abstract split in human experience, and therefore no subject/object split. The earliest languages show that human beings did not have separate words for abstract ideas and concrete objects. All words contained both literal and abstract meanings. Why did people use language this way? Because they thought this way (*Poetic Diction* 47-85). Eventually, single meanings in language became divided into “contrasted pairs—the abstract and the concrete, particular and general, objective and subjective” (85). This happened because, again, people started thinking this way. But how is it that people thought the way they did in the past?

Barfield’s answer is that “those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas [...] exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker” (86). There are vast relations of meaning in life itself, apart from any such relations people assign with a linguistic label. These relations exist because “Thought” exists independent of human thinkers. There is a visible parallel in Lewis’s system. Before his conversion Lewis saw that Reason must be a quality of God, that God was Reason Himself (*Surprised by Joy* 228). Nature is permeated with meaning because it is permeated with Thought.

The ancient languages prove that these meanings or relationships were apprehended by people as “direct perceptual experience” (*Poetic Diction* 86). They “observed a unity” and were not, therefore, “conscious of *relation*” (86). The relation was not a relation but a reality—the objects connected or the object and idea connected were not seen as separate-but-connected; they were seen as one. “But,” Barfield continues, “we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one” (86-87). Lewis’s thinking is similar here. In *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, for example, he chronicles the increasing separation of subject from object from the late Middle Ages to the Romantic Period:

By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it [the new astronomy] substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. The world was emptied, first of her indwelling spirits, then of her occult sympathies and antipathies, finally of her colours, smells, and tastes. [...] The result was dualism rather than materialism. The mind, on whose ideal constructions the whole method depended, stood over against its object in ever sharper dissimilarity. Man with his new powers became rich like Midas but all that he touched had gone dead and cold. This process, slowly working, ensured during the next century the loss of the old mythical imagination: the conceit, and later the personified abstraction, takes its place. Later still, as a desperate attempt to bridge a gulf which begins to be found intolerable, we have the Nature poetry of the Romantics. (3-4)

Reality was “once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced,” but now such knowing can “only be reached by an effort of the individual mind—this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor, and every metaphor is true” (*Poetic Diction* 88). Barfield explains this latter point in an appendix: “The distinction between true and false metaphor corresponds to the distinction between Myth and Allegory, allegory being a more or less conscious hypostatization of *ideas* [...] and myth the true child of Meaning, begotten on imagination” (201). Myth, or true metaphor, is the act of perceiving a unity (of objects or an object and an idea) not as an abstract relationship but a concrete singularity.

Barfield illustrates:

We find poet after poet expressing in metaphor and simile the analogy between death and sleep and winter, and again between birth and waking and summer, and these, once more, are constantly made the types of a spiritual experience—of the death in the individual soul of its accidental part and the putting on of incorruption. [...]

Now by our definition of a ‘true metaphor’, there should be some older, undivided ‘meaning’ from which all these logically disconnected, but poetically connected ideas have sprung. And in the beautiful myth of Demeter and Persephone we find precisely such a meaning. In the myth of Demeter the ideas of waking and sleeping, of summer and winter, of life and death, of mortality and immortality are all lost in one pervasive meaning. (91)

Different ideas find singular unity in myth. The connections are not logical but analogical, associative, visible in the imagination. They are varied and multiple, and so Barfield claims that myth is the true child of meaning, that is, in myth there is a multiplicity of meaning. We catch here a hint of Lewis’s new Narnia where everything *means* more. “Mythology,” Barfield continues, “is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities” (*Poetic Diction* 92).

We turned to Barfield in order to find out how myth communicates apart from language. Answer: myth as a mode of *linguaging* communicates holistic meaning to our immediate perceptions. It bypasses the abstracting reason and linear (time-bound) language (which is to say it bypasses the cognitive space between sign and signified) and enters immediately, intuitively into our understanding so that it is not an abstraction *containing* meaning, but rather *is* an immediate, experiential reality. It is *concrete thought*. Imagine a line on a chalkboard representing a spectrum. At one end of the line appears the word

“Abstract,” and the other end the word “Concrete.” The instructor applies these kinds of knowing to the definition of a man. Thus, at the abstract end of the spectrum is written a dictionary definition of a man, followed by a poetical expression of a man, a photograph of a man, and, at the concrete end of the spectrum, the instructor himself standing beneath the line:

Abstract	←MAN→	Concrete
A man (male gender of the species) is a bi-pedal primate capable of speech.	“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties . . .” <i>(Hamlet 2.2.292-93)</i>	[Photograph] The instructor himself

Nowhere in this spectrum do we yet see *concrete thought*. Even the photograph perceived in the imagination is an abstraction of the real man, despite its close approximation to the concrete reality. But where in this spectrum do we fit Tolkien’s hobbits? Admittedly hobbits are like people, a version of the human, but in Tolkien’s myth they are *not* human beings, and therefore they are not abstractions of anything. Hobbits are concrete realities; they are *real* imaginary objects, that is, concrete objects of thought in the sense that, when our minds turn to hobbits, we both think about and experience them at the same time. Myth allows subject to commingle with object with greater immediacy and intimacy, and it allows thinking and experiencing to occur simultaneously. The agent of commingling in the human mind, the place into which myth can enter with immediate, intuitive understanding and be, as Barfield says, ‘begotten,’ is the imagination.

Lewis’s reason for the loss of *concrete thought* differs from Barfield’s. Where Barfield’s Anthroposophic philosophy looks to the evolution of consciousness, Lewis roots the epistemological dilemmas in a long process of separation that begins in the fall. His theory is of a gradual de-evolution of human knowing, an epistemological decay. Passages heretofore quoted from *The Last Battle*, *Letters to Malcolm*, *The Great Divorce*, and “Myth Became Fact” have already suggested the epistemological superiority of knowing in heaven over knowing on earth. Lewis believed that this has not always been the case on earth, but that the *splits* that occurred in human knowing began with the fall and increased with time. We see the beginnings of this idea in *Perelandra*.

When Ransom arrives on the unfallen world of Perelandra, he experiences a place similar to that “Mountain of myth” or “heaven of legend and imagination” which Lewis describes in “Myth Became Fact” (66). It is a place which, like myth, is beyond words. Ransom is frustrated in trying to relate his story to his friends on earth because “it is words that are vague. The reason why



the thing can't be expressed is that it's too *definite* for language" (*Perelandra* 33). Ransom describes his early experience on the planet as involving a "sensation not of following an adventure but of enacting a myth" (47), and he wonders if "all the things which appeared as mythology on earth [were] scattered through other worlds as realities" after seeing the dragon beneath the fruit tree and recognizing an image of "the garden of the Hesperides" (45). *Perelandra* is an unfallen world and a planet where reality is mythic. Lewis reveals his theory about epistemological splits and the fall later in the novel when Ransom comes to realize that he must defeat his demon-possessed adversary, the Un-man, through physical combat. Ransom concludes,

Long since on Mars, and more strongly since he came to *Perelandra*, Ransom had been perceiving that the triple distinction of truth from myth and both from fact was purely terrestrial—was part and parcel of that unhappy division between soul and body which resulted from the Fall. (143-44)

As Martha Sammons aptly summarizes in her analysis of Lewis's epistemological thinking in *Perelandra*, "Since the fall in the Garden of Eden, man has separated subject from object, the phenomenal from the invisible numinous world, and *how* he experiences from *what* he experiences. The first result of this split was the demythologization of the physical world, which has taken us further and further away from the meaning of objects" (152). Sammons makes myth an integral part of knowing (as Lewis does in "Myth Became Fact") and its absence the cause of the loss of meaning in the world. That the split begins in the fall does not mean, though, that it occurred all at once. Lewis describes a world closer to its unfallen state in *That Hideous Strength*. Says Dimble, one of Ransom's faithful friends: "The Earth itself was more like an animal in those days. And mental processes were much more like physical actions" (284). Shortly afterward Dimble notes that Merlin is the "last vestige of an old order in which matter and spirit were, from our modern point of view, confused" (285). Clearly Lewis is positing a time when the abstract/concrete division in human knowing was almost unknown.

Lewis believes that the fall of man led eventually to a subject/object split in human knowing, that human consciousness in the past involved mental processes being much more like physical actions, that the subject/object split led to a separation of concrete experiencing and abstract thinking, and that this separation developed over a period of time beginning from the fall where the separation of spirit from matter first began. Recall that Lewis traced a thousand years of this development briefly in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (3-4), and in *Miracles* (as well as in the passage we read from *Letters to Malcolm*) he

predicts its conclusion, an end to the subject/object split and the problem of knowing:

The old, richly imaginative thought which still survives in Plato has to submit to the deathlike, but indispensable, process of logical analysis: nature and spirit, matter and mind, fact and myth, the literal and the metaphorical, have to be more and more sharply separated, till at last a purely mathematical universe and a purely subjective mind confront one another across an unbridgeable chasm. But from this descent also, if thought itself is to survive, there must be re-ascent and the Christian conception provides for it. Those who attain the glorious resurrection will see the dry bones clothed again with flesh, the fact and myth remarried, the literal and the metaphorical rushing together. (*Miracles* 211-12)

Lewis's ultimate solution to the dilemmas of knowing is an eschatological one. In a slow process of descent, a holistic kind of thinking natural to any unfallen Adam and Eve (whether Terran or Perelandrian), a kind of thinking that was still present even as late as Plato, gives way to a system of logical analysis which separates thought from experience. However, a new nature is to come wherein heaven and earth, the worlds of spirit and matter, become one (211). The old shadowlands will end. Real life will begin.

Myth acts like a language but is not language, nor does it depend on language to be communicated. Myth can be communicated in ways other than language, and it communicates more than language can: "Because it is so much 'larger' than words, myth allows us to go beyond the limitations of language" (Sammons 154). Myth solves the problem of knowing by removing abstraction from the equation. In myth the object is not external to the subject once the story pattern is perceived. The myth is a real object of thought, a sub-created, concrete reality, intended not to represent reality outside itself (though such representations occur when we allegorize from myth), but to be simply what it is, a pattern of the reality *behind* (not a pattern *about* that reality but an actual taste of the reality itself). Myth draws the imagination toward concrete knowing here in the valley of abstraction. It is able to do what truth and reason cannot do in our fallen world.

Having said this, we should not be quick to reject language as an ineffectual mode of knowing. Language can come close in metaphor to doing what myth does. Barfield introduced us to the "true metaphor" in *Poetic Diction* (87), a poetic constructing of language which yields meaningful connection between objects where the connection itself, the relationship, takes on the quality of the very real. Metaphor is where language can come close to being concrete here in the valley of abstraction. In the highest reality, language connects subject to object so completely that object is converted to meaning, and knowing to

experience. But in our phenomenal world, language abstracts the real; nevertheless, in metaphor language is able to come closer to fulfilling its function of uniting thinking and experiencing in the knower.

We have now come to the point at which we can make sense of Lewis's definition of meaning in "Bluspels and Flalansferes." We can posit the following explanations for the various elements of the peculiar final paragraph: truth is an abstract statement of correspondence with reality obtained by reason which operates in the abstract. If a statement is not true, then it is false. Meaning, however, is a product of imaginative connection through metaphor. The opposite of meaning is simply non-meaning, or as Lewis says, "nonsense"; thus, if no meaning is found or seen in a connection, then we would say the connection is meaningless or not really a connection at all. Whether or not a meaning corresponds to reality (whether or not it is true) is something that must be determined by reason.

But we cannot reason unless we have something to reason about. The "something to reason about" is not only reality but imaginatively perceived connections in reality. Furthermore, we cannot reason without a tool to reason with and this tool is language which must rely on metaphor (as "Bluspels" shows) and which cannot be purely literal.<sup>5</sup> Meaning, moreover, is the "antecedent condition" for truth and, therefore, the act of reasoning can be explained as follows: First, language is metaphorical, that is, language functions by making *meaningful* connections between a sign and a signified. Second, reasoning to truth consists of arriving at *language* statements which correspond with reality. Therefore, if reason always depends on language (even the language of mathematics) in order to function, it will always depend on meaning which is central to the function of language.

Meaning is also antecedent to reason in the sense that, while reason attempts to make connections between thought and reality, meaning is not limited to correspondences between thought and reality. Some meanings may be false, some true in terms of correspondence to reality, but meaning is about more than just reality. For example, the connection I make between Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and my own mother's death, which occurred while I was reading the novel, has no real world correspondence, no truth or falsehood, though it has meaning *to me*.

At the same time Lewis says there must be a "kind of truth or rightness in the imagination," that there is a "truth of the metaphor itself." If our thinking is ever "true" then our metaphors must have been "good." What makes a

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<sup>5</sup> Myth in its purest form is not a tool for reasoning since it bypasses language; however, it can be converted into such a tool when it is allegorized into abstract language statements.

metaphor “good” and what is the kind of “rightness” in the imagination that can be called a kind of “truth”? The answer lies at the end of “Bluspels and Flalansferes.” The final puzzling paragraph continues:

It does follow that if those original equations, between good and light, or evil and dark, between breath and soul and all the others, were from the beginning arbitrary and fanciful—if there is not, in fact, a kind of psycho-physical parallelism (or more) in the universe—then all our thinking is nonsensical. But we cannot, without contradiction, believe it to be nonsensical. And so, admittedly, the view I have taken has metaphysical implications. But so has every view. (158)

Perhaps the “psycho-physical parallelism [...] in the universe” to which Lewis refers is Barfield’s idea that meanings, connections, have their own reality: “Men do not *invent* those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker” (*Poetic Diction* 86). Perhaps the “psycho-physical parallelism” is Lewis’s idea that man is connected to reality supernaturally, perhaps by spirit as has been discussed before, perhaps by the essence of Mind that is God Himself (hence the reference to “metaphysical implications”). The “kind” of “imaginative truth” Lewis refers to here, then, would be reality perceived in the imagination. “Good” metaphors are those that make not “true” connections (in Lewis’s sense of truth as abstract statements in “Myth Became Fact”) but “real” connections in a Barfieldian sense where “good and light” somehow *are* one, as are “evil and dark” and “breath and soul.” Here imagination grasps truth because it is the concrete truth of a higher reality, only in this instance the higher is somehow among the lower; it is archetypal and interior (like the new Narnia—further in as well as further up [*Last Battle* 224-25]), holding our own reality together with connections that are concretely real but visible only as metaphor, as meanings in the imagination.

We may summarize the results of this exploration as follows:

1. Meaning is seen connection, relationship rightly perceived in the imagination.
2. Heaven is that higher reality in which everything means more because matter and spirit, and therefore subject and object, are more completely connected there, and one-for-one abstract thoughts give way to the multiplicity of concrete-experiential thought.
3. Meaning makes knowing possible and is more closely tied to imagination and experience than to reason and (abstracting) truth. Meaning begins in the imagination. Perceived relations occur as

imaginative perceptions of metaphor. Meanings become the “antecedent condition” for the operation of reason (“Bluspels” 157).

4. Meaning can be figurative or literal (as literal as Lewis allows language to be in his “Bluspels” critique).

5. Meaning can be concrete or abstract: it can be concrete either as imaginative connections, or genuinely concrete, i.e. Barfield’s “true metaphors” (*Poetic Diction* 87) and “concrete meaning” (92), or Lewis’s “psycho-physical parallelism” (“Bluspels” 158); it can also be abstract, i.e. “Myth Became Fact” where some meanings correspond to reality and when stated abstractly become truths (66).

### **The Minor Theme: Meanings in Texts**

Lewis has a great deal to say about meaning in literature and the problems of correct interpretation. In the brief survey that follows, we move away from the epistemological problem of defining meaning and to the critical problem of the meaning of a text. Here Lewis is not concerned only with the definition of meaning as “signification” but also with Webster’s first definition of meaning: “intention.” In this case, Lewis deals with what texts mean and what their authors intended. Lewis’s view regarding where meaning resides in relation to a text can best be described by a passage from George MacDonald, a writer who influenced Lewis greatly:

One difference between God’s work and man’s is, that, while God’s work cannot mean more than he meant, man’s must mean more than he meant. For in everything that God has made, there is layer upon layer of ascending significance; also he expresses the same thought in higher and higher kinds of that thought: it is God’s things, his embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts; therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen, so many are the thoughts allied to every other thought, so many are the relations involved in every figure, so many the facts hinted in every symbol. (“The Fantastic Imagination” 320-21)

This concept is echoed by Lewis in several instances:

“Creation” as applied to human authorship [...] seems to me an entirely misleading term. We make ἐξ ὑποχρεμένων [with regard to what lies at hand] i.e. we re-arrange elements He has provided. There is not a *vestige* of real creativity *de novo* in us. Try to imagine a new primary colour, a third sex, a fourth dimension, or even a monster wh. does not consist of bits of existing animals stuck together! Nothing happens. And that surely is why

our works [...] never mean to others quite what we intended: because we are re-combining elements made by Him and already containing *His* meanings. Because of those divine meanings in our materials it is impossible we shd. ever know the whole meaning of our own works, and the meaning we never intended may be the best and truest one. (*Collected Letters* 20 February 1943, 555)

On the issue of authorial intention (or authorial meaning), Lewis gives the following more detailed explication:

I have said vaguely 'meaning' or 'intention'. We shall have to give each word a fairly definite sense. It is the author who *intends*; the book *means*. The author's intention is that which, if it is realised, will in his eyes constitute success. If all or most readers, or such readers as he chiefly desires, laugh at a passage, and he is pleased with this result, then his intention was comic, or he intended to be comic. [...] *Meaning* is a much more difficult term. [...] The nearest I have yet got to a definition is something like this: the meaning of a book is the series or system of emotions, reflections, and attitudes produced by reading it. But of course this product differs with different readers. The ideally false or wrong 'meaning' would be the product in the mind of the stupidest and least sensitive and most prejudiced reader after a single careless reading. The ideally true or right 'meaning' would be that shared (in some measure) by the largest number of the best readers after repeated and careful readings over several generations, different periods, nationalities, moods, degrees of alertness, private pre-occupations, states of health, spirits and the like canceling one another out when (this is an important reservation) they cannot be fused so as to enrich one another. ("On Criticism" 139-40)

The first part of the definition of meaning in this passage, "the series or system of emotions, reflections, and attitudes produced by reading it," matches the definition heretofore given of meaning as connection or relationship. But then Lewis discusses "false" and "true" meanings. Do not meanings, however, precede truth or falsehood? *Meaning* certainly does, but, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, we are no longer examining Lewis's definition of meaning but have turned to his theory of literary interpretation, of finding *meanings* in a text. He argues that those meanings are true which the vast majority of the best readers throughout the years agree correspond to the text, and those meanings are false which occur in the mind of the most careless and prejudiced reader after a single reading. This is not to say that there are *no* meanings in the mind of the poor reader.

In contrast to the authorial intent of man is the authorial intent of God, in which meanings multiply beyond those of any individual human writer. This

is especially the case in the writings of the Bible. Lewis discusses this idea at length in *Reflections on the Psalms*:

Hitherto we have been trying to read the Psalms as we suppose—or I suppose—their poets meant them to be read. But this of course is not the way in which they have chiefly been used by Christians. They have been believed to contain a second or hidden meaning, an “allegorical” sense, concerned with the central truths of Christianity, with the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and with the Redemption of man. All the Old Testament has been treated in the same way. The full significance of what the writers are saying is, on this view, apparent only in the light of events which happened after they were dead. (84)

Lewis notes that a “second meanings” approach to interpretation is distrusted by “the modern mind” and also open to “self-deception.” He claims that the approach must be kept, however, for two reasons. First, if the biblical texts are inspired, then multiple meanings are likely since God fills creation, including books, with a greater multiplicity of meanings than any individual author could put into the text (98). His second reason for reading “second meanings” into the Old Testament texts is that Jesus did the same thing. On the road to Emmaus, for example, He showed the fulfillment of Old Testament texts in His own life: “He accepted—indeed He claimed to be—the second meaning of Scripture” (98-99).

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